

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-16

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 SAM-01 SAJ-01 EUR-25 IO-14 OMB-01

CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-07 H-03 INR-11 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-07

PA-04 RSC-01 PRS-01 SP-03 SS-20 USIA-15 AID-20 NIC-01

ACDA-19 DRC-01 /175 W

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R 141000Z AUG 74

FM AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 1217

INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN

AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

AMEMBASSY CAIRO

AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV

C O N F I D E N T I A L DAMASCUS 1656

EO 11652: GDS

TAGS: PINT, SY

SUBJECT: CHANGES IN SYRIAN MILITARY

1. LOCAL PRESS ANNOUNCED YESTERDAY THAT HIKMAT SHIHABI, FORMER DIRECTOR OF MILITARY INTELLIGENCE, WAS RECENTLY PROMOTED TO MAJOR GENERAL AND ALSO NAMED SYRIAN CHIEF OF STAFF. IN ADDITION, GENERALS NAJI JAMIL, COMMANDER OF THE AIR FORCE, AND YUSIF SHAKKOUR, FORMER CHIEF OF STAFF, WERE NAMED DEPUTY DEFENSE MINISTERS, RESPECTIVELY ALONG SIDE OF GENERAL AWAD BAGH WHO CINTINUES AS DEPUTY DEFENSE MINISTER. (JAMIL ALSO CONTINUES AS HEAD OF THE AIR FORCE.)

2. COMMENT: ALTHOUGH IT IS DIFFICULT TO SAY AT THIS EARLY STAGE WHAT THESE PROMOTIONS AND CHANGES MEAN, IT WOULD APPEAR THAT PRESIDENT ASSAD IS PUTTING HIS CLOSE FRIENDS INTO KEY POSITIONS IN THE SYRIAN MILITARY HIERARCHY. IT IS PARTICULARLY NOTEOWRTHY THAT THIS IS THE FIRST TIME THE DEFENSE MINISTER HAS THREE DEPUTIES, ONE OF WHOM, NAJI JAMIL, IS KNOWN FOR HIS CLOSENESS TO THE PRESIDENT.

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SHIHABI IS ALSO CLOSE TO THE PRESIDENT. DEFENSE MINISTER

TLAS, A SUNNI MUSLIM, HAS LONG BEEN DESCRIBED AS A MAN OF AMBITION AND ONE WHO ENJOYS A FAIR AMOUNT OF POPULARITY BOTH WITHIN THE ARMY AND THE GENERAL POPULATION WHICH IS LARGELY SUNNI. BY SURROUNDING TLAS WITH HIS OWN MEN BOTH IN THE MINISTRY AND THE GENERAL STAFF, ASSAD MAY SIMPLY BE WALLING HIM OFF.

3. IT IS ALSO RUMORED IN TOWN THAT SHIHABI WAS PUT IN THIS POSITION BECAUSE HE IS THE ONLY HIGH-RANKING OFFICER WILLING AND ABLE TO SIGN A FINAL AGREEMENT WITH THE ISRAELIS IF AND WHEN SUCH A STAGE IS REACHED. FORMER CHIEF OF STAFF SHAKKOUR, A CHRISTIAN, WAS REPORTEDLY UNWILLING TO DO SO. AT THE SAME TIME, BECAUSE OF SHAKKOUR'S FAITH, ASSAD MAY HAVE WISHED FOR A SUNNI MUSLIM LIKE SHIHABI TO BE CHIEF OF STAFF DURING THE CRITICAL PERIOD AHEAD. IN ANY EVENT, SHIHABI IS A FIRST-CLASS PROFESSIONAL OFFICER WHO CAN BE EXPECTED TO DO A GOOD JOB IN HIS NEW POSITION. MEANWHILE, THERE ARE REPORTS OF OTHER REASSIGNMENTS WITHIN THE ARMY AS WELL AS ARRESTS OF OFFICERS ALLEGEDLY IN OPPOSITION TO ASSAD'S POLICY OF DISENGAGEMENT AND EVENTUAL PEACE WITH THE ISRAELIS. ASSAD IS SAID TO BE CURRENTLY IN STRONG POSITION WITHIN THE ARMY AND WITHIN THE COUNTRY. OCCASIONALLY, HOWEVER, ONE HEARS CONCERN EXPRESSED THAT IF THERE IS NO MOVEMENT TOWARD A SETTLEMENT OVER THE NEXT YEAR OR SO, ASSAD MAY BEGIN TO ENCOUNTER OPPOSITION TO HIS REGIME FROM OFFICERS WHO ARE NOT SO MUCH IN OPPOSITION TO HIS POLICY OF NEGOTIATION WITH ISRAEL, BUT WHO RESENT THE NARROWLY BASED NATURE OF HIS REGIME AND WHO WOULD ATTEMPT TO USE FAILURE AT THE PEACE TABLE AS AN EXCUSE TO ATTEMPT TO REMOVE ASSAD FROM POWER. END COMMENT.
SCOTES

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